DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 375 402 CS 214 542

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TITLE Letting Students in on the Secrets of Evaluation and Placement.
PUB DATE Mar 94
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (45th, Nashville, TN, March 16-19, 1994).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Discourse Analysis; Higher Education; *Student Evaluation; Training Methods; *Writing Evaluation; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *Academic Discourse; *Basic Writers; University of Arizona

ABSTRACT

To better facilitate students' learning how to write with authority, instructors need to look more carefully at what it is they do when they teach composition courses. They must look critically at what they accept as "natural" or "true" about good writing practices. A training session for the graders of the Freshmen Placement Exam at the University of Arizona clearly demonstrates the criteria that academics look for in student writing and how consistently the presence or absence of that criteria determines a student's grade. For precisely these reasons, such training might also function as an essential element of the first year composition curriculum. In other words, students, like instructors, might be invited to learn the criteria that are used to evaluate their work. In one particular basic writing class, the instructor and the students found that a frank discussion about these criteria proved enlightening. Scoring some sample exams themselves, students were puzzled about the notion of voice, surprised that instructors were interested in the "personality" of the writers. They had not realized the importance of organization, of style, creativity, or imagination. They had not thought about the need to say something new. Furthermore, students' responses to the instructor's questionnaire asking them to theorize about the nature of academic discourse demonstrate that they were able to recognize, internalize, and even critique those qualities of good writing that college instructors identify as requisite. (Handout on the training session is attached.) (TB)

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ED 375 402

Letting Students in on the Secrets of Evaluation and Placement

This paper is my second one on this topic. The first was a theoretical piece which I presented at 4C's two years ago. Today's presentation is dedicated to the practical application of that theory; it's about what happened in my composition classroom when I enacted the curriculum I suggested earlier on. If you are interested in the theory, I refer you to my article that evolved just published in the Fall, 1993 issue of Journal of Basic Writing. For now, I am going to summarize its argument only by giving you its two basic premises.

One: we as composition instructors have constructed our notions of what constitutes good writing not by divining some general or transcendent standards, but rather by internalizing the institutional practices through which we self-authorize within our own discourse community. These notions of what constitutes good writing drive the criteria by which we as English professors and compositionists evaluate (grade) and authorize ("place") students in our writing courses. Thus, what we want from students' writing is what we do in our own writing.

Premise Two: we composition instructors are people who are generous and equitable in spirit and intention. (At least we are when we are function in our professional capacities.) Thus, what we generally aspire for our writing instruction is to empower our students to be autonomous and self-actualized, to use language to think critically and create their own authority. In short, we want our students to be good writers because we want them to be successful students and citizens, to "relate speaking the word to transforming reality."

Let's say we accept those premises as at least generally descriptive of what we do and

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why we do it. You can see how we are then posed with a problem. For in some ways, our system for evaluating student writing contradicts our pedagogical goals; it reveals how we do not walk our talk. What we say is that we want our students to write well, to write with authority, but what we do is practice a discourse and a discipline that (traditionally anyway) functions to conceal the ways by which we (as professors and as writers) earn authority at the university.

In order to better facilitate students' learning how to write with authority then, we need to look more carefully at what it is that we do when we profess English in general and--more to the point--when we teach composition courses in specific. We need to systematically get as much distance as possible from, in order to examine the system of, the norms and beliefs that drive what we accept as "natural" and "true" about our composition practices and our standards for good writing. So, my third premise today is that we can most effectively reveal those methods by laying bare for students the process by which we as composition teachers evaluate student writing. And I don't mean simply announcing the product of our evaluations--the grades--but rather demonstrating what it is that we say and do when we evaluate and place students.

At the University of Arizona this process is best demonstrated during what is called the FPE (Freshman Placement Exam) training session. During this session, graders of the holistic essay exam are introduced to the rubric for FPE evaluations; it describes the characteristics of writing associated with each of the four possible scores graders can assign to an exam. Then the fifteen to twenty graders read specially selected sample essays, assign each a tentative score, and then discuss their justifications for each score. Thus, the graders "calibrate" in order to prepare for the task of grading hundreds of placement exams and assigning those writers to the type of composition course (honors, "regular," basic) most compatible with the writer's existing

capabilities. These UA training sessions are very effective, I am told, because their holistic scores are "reliable." In that context, reliable means 1) that the grading sessions generate very few 1/4 splits (that is, a situation in which the two readers of one exam have assigned it to honors and to basic writing class both) and because 2) the subsequent grades that students ultimately receive in their assigned composition courses usually demonstrate the appropriateness of the match between the course and the student's abilities. Further, as an essential aspect of training first year graduate students to be composition instructors, this training process promotes instructors' internalizing the standards of the department and--to a certain extent--of the nation.

For precisely those reasons, I am arguing, it can also function as an essential element of the first year composition curriculum. The process could be particularly effective, I think, for basic writers. In order to discover just how effective such a project could be in helping students to realize and perhaps internalize those features of good writing that composition teachers look for, I piloted this approach twice, both times during English 100 (basic writing) courses.

In order to save time, I won't describe to you in detail how I set up and arranged the approximately three week long unit wherein I trained my students to be graders of FPEs; however, those interested in the nuts and bolts can refer at a later time to the handouts I've provided for you. Therein I describe the daily activities in detail and provide you with copies of the FPE itself, the rubric for grading the exam, and--one of the most important materials of the curriculum, I think--a questionnaire that I developed and used as a prompt for facilitate students' theorizing about what they had been doing in the course of learning how to do score the exams and what they had realized about the nature of academic writing.

In the remainder of my time today, I want to let you know what was engaging and useful

about the exploration not only from my own point of view but also from the students'. To me, one of the most interesting aspects of the unit was that students had no trouble at all identifying the essays that labeled students as basic writers; rarely, if ever, did their scores differ from those that the teachers assigned to the average (that is, scoring 2 or 3) essays. However, I was quite surprised by the very large number of 1/4 splits. These splits only occurred on papers that the teacher readers had assigned honors placement (a "4" score) while my students judged the essays to be indicative of basic writers' work. These splits accounted for well over half of the students' responses to teacher-determine honors essays. (Even in the course of the training sessions for teachers scoring exams 1/4 splits are a cite of essential information about what kind of work puts pressures on the margins of "good writing." But rarely do they occur.) Even more shocking to me were my students' explanations for their low scores: writers who used movies or personal experiences or opinions to evidence their arguments were not writing good essays, they said, because they weren't relying on facts. In particular, an essay that--to the teachers' minds--gave clever and articulate evidence of persistent sexist attitudes in American culture by presenting an analysis of Die Hard was deemed "stupid. . .because it just talked about movies and movies aren't real in the first place."

Another surprise cropped up during our classroom discussions about what students saw as unfamiliar or ambiguous terms on the rubric for grading that I asked them to study before actually scoring any exams. They were bewildered about the concept of voice and why teachers would want someone to have this quality. They defined the term among themselves as "the quality that made you sure what someone's opinion was, the way that you could hear the personality of the writer." Their clearest example of a "genuine" or "natural" voice spoke in an

essay in which the writer was, they said, "obviously a jerk because he showed he was a sexist and didn't think that female teachers would be reading and grading his paper." So, to them, "voice"--at least initially--was synonymous with letting your opinions slip out (especially your "negative" opinions). They assumed that a writer whose voice they could most easily identify was one who had no good sense of his audience. Thus, they couldn't understand why teachers would say that "genuine voice" was a characteristic of honors writing.

Most important though are the ways that my students evaluated the project as successful. I have collected and reviewed their responses to several journal writing assignments that I gave during the course of the unit. In their reflections expressed in their own language I see proof positive of the benefits of this approach to teaching writing. For instance, consider these responses to my request that they compare their own FPE exam written on the first day of our semester together with other exams they had read during the course of the unit. KAREN says, "I realize/remember now that I did not have a plan for my essay. . .a student who can manipulate a topic so that he can incorporate what he knows into an essay is a student with 'good writing' ability." JEFF claims, "The essay I wrote is almost identical to the other essay I read; they both lack what is needed to be placed in English 101 and that is style, creativity and imagination. We both wrote what we thought the teacher expected us to write and that is the basic boring facts and statistics on feminism [the topic of the FPE]. . . .My assignment to this class isn't just involved in writing; it's also involved with thinking and imagination." And JEANETTE: "An honors placement is one that is complex enough to go over my head. . .this particular writer rather than taking the subject as one large spectrum, like I would have chosen to do, picked one instance or situation which she was close to or related with and shared this experience with

his/her readers. . . .When i said essay #x was boring because she was telling us thing we already knew, I realized my essay is just the same."

Here is a telling answer, I think, the assignment to write to a friend back home who'd be taking FPE soon and give the friend advice about how to do well on the exam: EDISON tells his buddy, "At first I thought they wanted excellent grammar, mechanics, etc., but they didn't. Well at least not that much. To me they want good details about the issue and the issue only. No fancy words, just straight to the point and no dragging it off to impress them."

Students' responses to my questionnaire asking them to theorize about the nature of academic discourse and to reflect on their experiences grading FPEs-demonstrate that they were able to recognize, internalize, and even critique those qualities of good writing that we instructors identify as requisite. Interestingly, their explanations of what constitutes good writing parallel the concepts and even the wording that Bartholomae himself uses and that drive the theory informing his basic writing curriculum as well as my own. For instance, in answer to the question "What kinds of rules does the group [of people who use academic discourse] have about what students should or shouldn't say? How does the group keep outsiders out?" students said things like this: KAREN, "If a student can make a teacher think or view a topic from a different perspective, the student has succeeded." LORENA, "I think this 'group' [teachers] is implying not to be stereotypical or be one sided on debatable issues.. . The one whose voice isn't respected is the one who's stereotypical." GLADYS "The group thinks that a writer's personality and style should be unique. . .[but] most outsiders don't know what is meant by 'mature content.'

The handout's questions concerning who has authority to speak in this academic discourse

community met answers like these: (TROY) "The kind of writing that the university wants is writing that shows a lot of knowledge in one area not a lot of knowledge on everything." (GLADYS) "The person who is most qualified to talk or have a say-so are the person who has the confidence to talk either because he or she has an experience or knows vocabulary or has the right conception or belief.. . .The voice that is not likely to be respected is a person's voice who has little experiences in talking, has limited vocabulary, has limited exposure to certain concepts and beliefs. This can be the kind of person the group is trying to shut out. This can be also a person who aren't familiar to this kind of language use and refrained to [use it] and as a result choose to be silenced in which he or she has no control over the language use the group uses."

When asked to consider the language of academic discourse and speculate about what other values and beliefs academics might have, students disclosed their considerable talents at critique. MICHELLE said, "They also value honesty and uniqueness, an individualist. I think their view of the world is one that's very competitive. Their specialized language gives them a label--a group of individuals with a place in society, a career and status. Being that they view the world as competitive, they play in the game. They use this language because it sets them apart." ANGIE thinks "This group probably views the world as a dull and fairly uneducated place. The effect on 'mainstream' people who hear these people use this language is a sort of hostility. 'Why do they think they're so good' may be the question."

When I asked students what was the most surprising thing they learned during the time we worked with FPEs, I discovered that their shocks were not so much different from mine: ANGIE said, "The essays I thought were 1s were [really] 4s because of their creativity. Grammar wasn't most important." while LORENA claimed this: "The most surprising thing I

learned was that I could manipulate a topic question and use it to my advantage; which I never thought of." For GLADYS "the most surprising thing that I heard is that the disagreement between preference and tastes of teachers are sometimes unpredictable," and for ELI "one of the most surprising things I learned is that teachers ask a lot out of the students for a good grade on the placement exam."

"What was the most useful thing you learned during this unit?" I asked them. TISHA answered, "I learned that no one in English 100 is 'stupid,' they just didn't get the skills need in their educational experiences. This helps many people feel better and this class will give them a better chance of succeeding in school." ALISSA said, [I learned that] "I was trying to write sophisticatedly so that my essays sounded like college level material. What I didn't realize was that sometimes writing just needs to be simple. . .I've learned that creativity is a big part of placement exams." GLADYS "learned . . .to always keep in mind who our readers are which really help because the interests of readers must be kept always in the mind [that is] is a duty of the writer." This unit is useful (ANGELINA) said "because most of my friends think that the placement exam they will be taking during summer is about being able to write an essay with 'dictionary words.'"

And finally, when I asked the students whether or not they were glad that we did this unit in our class, they unanimously said yes. Most students also said they thought the unit would work even better placed at the beginning rather than at the end of the semester. Many said they would have liked to have spent more time on this section. One student suggested letting students revise one of the rated "1" exams so they could practice revising. This unanimity and enthusiasm of themselves are evidence enough to convince me that the project I've started is

necessary. But to conclude, I'll give you just a couple of the students' own elaborations on the consensus that "Yes, we like this idea. It helps." MICHELLE "I am glad we did this unit because I think that until students become aware of this they are in the dark and left out of what is really necessary to succeed as a writer at the university." AMY, "I felt this unit was beneficial because all my teachers before made a 'game' out of writing and trying to figure out what they wanted on paper. It always seemed like I figured the secret out when it was too late. With this unit we went directly to what is expected and wanted and studied why."

I couldn't have said it better myself.

Letting Student In On the Secrets of Evaluation and Placement -- HANDOUT
CCCC -- March 18, 1994

I. Preparation of Materials

Using a prompt that had been retired from actual FPE exam settings, I asked the instructors of two sections each of English 100 (basic writing first year composition course) 101 ("mainstream" first year composition course) and 103 (honors composition course) to have their students write responses to the prompt. All students were given the same time period (30 minutes) and instructions that are give in an actual FPE exam. A group of four experienced FPE graders scored the approximately 150 exams generated. Each exam was assigned at least two scores; I then read and scored all exams myself. Thus, I had access to at least three teacher evaluations for each of the sample FPE exams.

II. Initial In-Class Preparation

On the first day of English 100 class, students wrote a diagnostic essay in response to the same prompt and with same instructions as those given to the students who wrote the materials described above. I told them that I would read their essays to make sure that they had been placed appropriately and that we would be referring to their essays later on during the semester.

III. In-Class Work with FPE Exams.

During the last month of English 100, we spent about four weeks on a unit dedicated to examining "academic discourse." During this time, we read sections of Mike Rose's Lives on the Boundaries, in particular sections about the "academic club" and academic writing (Chapters 6 and 7). In addition, we enacted the graders' "calibration" process as follows:

a. Students read and studied the rubric for grading FPEs. In addition, they read eight FPE essays, evaluated and assigned a holistic grade to each, and wrote their justifications for the scores they gave.

b. During class, we all talked about the scores the students had assigned and compared the students' scores with the instructors'. We discussed at length any discrepancies between the students' evaluations and the instructors' and reviewed carefully the justifications each group gave for the scores.

c. Each student read two other placement exams assigned only to her and then also read the one she herself had written on the first day of class. Students wrote about the similarities and differences in their exams and the others they scored and about the ways that their writing had improved since the beginning of the semester; we discussed their responses to these assignments.

d. Students wrote a letter to someone they knew back at home who might be going to college soon. In the letter, students were to explain in their own language what it is that they think English teachers are looking for when they score placement exams.

e. Students wrote out answers to the questions on a handout I gave them. The questions require students to think about the language that teachers at the university use, to theorize about the nature of academic discourse, and to reflect on their experiences during the process of grading FPEs.

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